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ABSTRACT

In a world conditioned by what Margaret Meade and others have called an underlying system of inherited inequalities, it is natural that educators in particular should try to promote at least some semblance of equality of opportunity. Because the creation of an elite of some kind seems to be a natural and unavoidable by-product of every society, the only sensible goal must be to ensure that those who belong to it are as civilized and public-spirited as possible. A factual and comparative study of independent education in Europe, North America, and the Antipodes demonstrates that the elitist tendencies of independent education vary in effect and force, depending on the constitutional, legal, and managerial framework in which such schools operate in different countries. Both constitutional and legislative controls are important factors in determining the status of private schools, but no less important are the patterns and philosophies of education which are enshrined in their own statutes or prospectives. (BZ)

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PATTERNS OF INDEPENDENT EDUCATION - FACTORS WHICH DETERMINE THE DEGREE OF ELITISM ILLUSTRATED ESPECIALLY FROM GERMANY, DENMARK AND THE UK

by Peter Mason

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AERA CONFERENCE. Wednesday April 16th.1986.

Paper by Peter Mason. Hon.Director of Research, Independent Schools Information Service, England.

Subject: Patterns of Independent Education - Factors which determine the degree of elitism illustrated especially from Germany, Denmark and the UK.

In a world largely conditioned by what Professor Meade and others have called an underlying system of inherited inequalities, it is natural that educationalists in particular and sociologists and economists in general should be especially concerned to promote, if not absolute equality, at least some real equality of opportunity. How best to do this and how far it is possible to achieve any real shift has been, of course, the subject of continuing controversy from Jencks to the present day. Jean Floud, in a strongly critical article on the Jencks view that education offers little if any hope of equalising opportunity (see *Equalities and Inequalities in Education, Academic Press.London.1975. pp.37ff.*) argued that the appropriate question to ask is not whether schools can change people, but whether, other things being equal, the self-perpetuating momentum of the closed system of inherited inequalities can be checked by the injection of outside resourcesin the form of publicly provided education and training. She went on to say that if the distribution of public funds on education is selective according to ability or "merit" or choice the effect will be to increase inequality even though more children from humble homes are numbered among students at advanced levels. Furthermore, though parents who pay fees at independent schools increase the amount of educational resources available for general distribution, they reinforce the conservative influences which stem from the closed circle of friendship and intermarriage fostered by closed communities.

My very limited objective today is not to dispute Mrs Floud's general contention or to attempt to solve the equation of social justice but to demonstrate from the factual and comparative study of independent education in Europe, North America and the Antipodes in which I am engaged how what are usually called in the jargon elitist

tendencies of independent education (to say nothing of similar tendencies in public systems) vary in effect and force, depending on the constitutional, legal and managerial framework in which such schools operate in different countries.

I shall, therefore, endeavour to use the words 'elitist' and 'elitism' in a neutral sense, despite any personal commitment to increasing equality of opportunity - firstly, because it seems beyond doubt that the equally desirable goals of freedom of choice for the individual and equality of opportunity are at least partially mutually exclusive and presuppose the need for compromise; and secondly, because the creation of an elite of some kind seems to be a natural and unavoidable by-product of every society, so that the only sensible goal must be to ensure, in Platonic terms though not with a Platonic model, that those who belong to it are as civilised and public-spirited as possible.

The nature and function of an independent sector of education is determined by a number of factors or controls, some of them arising from constitutional or legislative decree or from executive action by government, others from the mores of the society concerned, and others again from the economic pressures which go along with private enterprise. It is the nature and interaction of these controls which in turn determine firstly where a given system of independent schools may be placed between the two poles of freedom of choice and equality of opportunity, and secondly how far it can be charged with elitism, the creation and/or reproduction of a privileged minority, access to which is limited by inherited rank, wealth or ability.

The most obvious and formal controls stem from clauses in written constitutions (where these exist) which define the role of the state and the rights of the individual, including the relation of church and state and the delegation of powers to regional and provincial authorities. For example, the first amendment of the US constitution, with its separation of church and state as subsequently interpreted by the Supreme Court, does much to explain the composition of the private sector there and the fact that up to the present it has received only the minimal fiscal support from federal and state governments; while the 'due process' clause of the fourteenth Amendment

establishes the right to parental choice of private education as long as it meets reasonable standards as laid down by the states. In the Netherlands, Article 208 of the 1814 constitution as revised in 1922 not only establishes the principle of freedom in education and of parental choice but also enforces equality of standards between the public and private sectors by ordering public funding of both sectors alike - something which is expressly forbidden in Article 33 of the Italian constitution.

Next in order are the controls or benefits laid down by the legislature at national, or (where devolution of educational control occurs as in the US, Canada, Australia and Germany), at state or provincial level. These controls take the form of clauses in Education, Finance and other Acts and of Standing Orders and administrative regulations issued by ministers and civil servants. They may either impose extra financial burdens on or authorise relief to independent schools from rates and from taxes of all kinds national and local, or entitle them to receive charitable donations or shared services with state schools. This heading accounts for the regulation of school attendance at independent schools at least during the years of compulsory education and for requirements of varying complication and stringency for their registration; and in some countries, for their curriculum, for the examination and assessment of pupils and the certification of their teachers. All these bear upon the status of the independent school and its place in the elitist spectrum. Other laws may encourage or even require that independent schools be non-profit-making trusts or charities rather than commercial enterprises or limit the possibility of financial aid or relief to the first category of school.

Both constitutional and legislative controls of this kind are important factors in determining the status of private schools and the social and intellectual hinterlands on which they draw for pupils. No less important are the patterns and philosophies of education which are enshrined in their own statutes or prospectuses - especially when, as in Australia, the great majority of private schools are directly controlled by a religious denomination or are at least in sympathy with a particular creed or church but because of considerable subsidies and of the quality of the education they provide

confer real advantages over the public system as a whole. It must be added, however, that in most countries Catholic private schools recruit from a wider social range than other denominational and non-denominational schools, whether they receive full subsidy, as in the Netherlands, France and Spain, or partial subsidy as in Germany and Australia, or when in the US they receive only limited support under Chapter 1 for the disadvantaged. They may, however, and often do include a number of schools which are both more exclusive and expensive than the rest, and which, in all countries, confer advantages of status and quality of education of a more strongly elitist kind.

At the other end of the spectrum, the growing group of fundamentalist schools in the North American continent, in the Antipodes, and to a lesser extent in Europe, are elitist only in terms of offering and demanding membership of a soi-disant elite group without other than religious pretensions to special status or advantage. Yet again, free and community-based schools, as well as those which promote educational theories like those of Steiner and Montessori, are often in principle egalitarian but are in fact mainly supported by the middle and professional classes, who can afford to back their educational predilections no less than those who pay fees to more orthodox independent schools.

The controls exercised either restrictively or beneficially upon the independent sector by law and by its own philosophies of education are, however, a reflection of broader societal influences. These, of course, evolve and change with time, but they have their roots in the historical and spiritual past of the society in question. For example, the aims and ethos of the traditional 19th century English boarding school, which spread through the English-speaking world, remain potent in many schools belonging to NAIS in the US, to CAIS in Canada and to the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, while a very different concept of the role of the school and the content of education informs both public and private sectors in many European countries. The current of egalitarianism and the pursuit of equality of opportunity, which has since the 1940s gained force and influence in all countries alike, though to different degrees, has in its turn greatly influenced the attitude both of governments and

of the public to private education. In some countries, notably the UK, France, Spain and Greece it has brought the private sector under direct attack, which either threatens the public subsidies which make the schools available to the less well-off or, as in Great Britain, aims at the abolition of all fee-paying education.

I hope this perhaps rather obvious summary will help to demonstrate the complication of interacting factors which give the independent sectors of our different countries their place on the elitist spectrum, from which I would remind you that there is no absolute escape. I would now like to illustrate their effect a bit more precisely by reference to some more specific examples.

In the Netherlands in 1982/3 71.7% of all children attended Catholic, Protestant or lay private schools. These by law receive equal support from government to that given to state schools in terms of provision of premises and running costs. They may not charge fees, apart from small means-tested charges for school visits and amenities, must follow state norms in salaries, curriculum and examinations, and are open to inspection by state inspectors. These controls permit no more than two hours of each week to be devoted to a school's private initiative, though the wind is tempered increasingly to Steiner and similar schools. These now receive financial subsidy at primary and sometimes also at secondary level and have increased in number rapidly in the past ten years. Any educational superiority Dutch private schools can claim comes from the greater dedication of staff and involvement of pupils and parents rather than from superior resources - and there is no evidence that attendance at a private school, as opposed to university or other qualifications, influences career chances through the nepotism of a powerful school-based old-boy network. Clearly these schools are low on the elitist scale; but nevertheless they foster and reproduce the mainly middle-class ethos of the majority who use them and for the 85% in denominational schools some degree of commitment to institutional Christianity or at the least to Christian ethics.

In Germany, while the strict academic standards of the 19th century remain strong in terms of curriculum and comprehensive education is only patchily accepted, reaction to the trauma of the Hitler era has engendered a determination to achieve a genuinely

democratic society, and this is clearly visible in legislation about private education. Though responsibility for education rests with the 11 Laender, the Federal Constitution of 1949 is exceptional amongst its European counterparts in the extent of support and protection offered to the independent sector. Article 7 guarantees for all regions of W.Germany public inspection of schools, the establishment of religion as a required subject and the right of existence of private schools. Subsections 4 and 5 state that private schools equivalent to schools in the state system (Ersatzschulen) must, to obtain official recognition, fulfil certain requirements about aims, premises and staffing; and lay down that **there must be no discrimination between pupils by reason of parental means.**

As a result, many private schools began to receive subsidies from 1951 and in 1966 the Feederal Court ruled that, because of the 'no discrimination' clause, Ersatzschulen were legally entitled to subsidy from the Laender governments. Though the SDP is less friendly than the CDU and CSU to private schools, all Laender give support up to about 70% of running costs and some extend it to other types of private school which do not conform to state norms. (Confessional schools get full grants in Bavaria and elsewhere are often further subsidised from church funds and make no fee charge except for boarders). There are also state tax allowances for parents of children receiving education away from home and fee-supplements for those in real need.

In terms of social intake, therefore, independent schools, which educate about 9.4% of the total school population, are open to children of relatively poorly-off parents who choose them either on grounds of belief or of educational opportunity. The schools cover all types of primary, secondary and technical education but are strongest at the academic secondary (Gymnasium), technical and vocational(Berufsfachschulen) levels; and they provide a form of upward social mobility not always available in Laender which have adopted a comprehensive pattern in their state systems. Some schools, many of them Catholic or Protestant boarding schools, have a special cachet in later life, but in general the five main groups of schools belonging to the umbrella organisation, *Arbeitsgemeinschaft freier Schulen*, are valued for their variety, their independence and the quality of education they

provide in a society which sets high value on qualifications as well as on freedom of choice. On the elitist scale they rank *pari passu* with the better state schools and resemble them more than they differ from them, except in terms of their independence and the benefits accruing from the involvement of parents, pupils and staff in an enterprise to which all subscribe.

In Denmark all the factors work together to maintain a long-standing tradition of private education, reflecting long-standing convictions about liberty of choice and respect for individual beliefs as well as an intensely democratic instinct for social justice which manifests itself in many different aspects of Danish life. A law of 1814 sanctioned the existence of a private sector which was extended in the 1840s by Grundtvig's folk high school movement for young adults and confirmed by article 76 of the constitution of 1949, This establishes the right of parents and guardians to provide comparable education outside the state system. Government legislation ensures financial subsidy for up to about 80% of running costs to private schools of all types, philosophies and religious beliefs provided they reach a modest standard of comparability and teach the Danish language; and in addition gives help with loans and the interest on loans and offers free places to children of the less well-off during compulsory education. Most schools are non-profit-making and are founded by groups of parents to meet their special needs (e.g. Montessori or Steiner programmes) or to serve a confessional, political or ideological group. New and quite small schools are encouraged to apply for grant if they can muster at least seven pupils, a principal and funds for building. Each school enjoys the same and quite extensive choice of educational methods and programmes as do state schools; and the impartial neutrality of government allows aid to socialist- and marxist-oriented and even international schools alongside confessional and ethnic ones. While most pupils come from middle-class and lower-middle-class homes, the modest fees attract working class parents to economise to pay them and the free-place fund also helps.

As a result Danish private schools reflect the pluralism of a highly democratic society and are a virtually undisputed and welcome element in the national provision for education. There is no

evidence that going to a private school gives any special social advantage in career or life generally, apart from the natural ones of a good home background and education. Denmark demonstrates very clearly that a combination of favourable legislation and a tradition of liberal democracy can effectively minimise elitism in education. The only foreseeable threat to the private sector there would come from a major increase in its size from the present 8.8% and the financial costs involved. Here is a situation which makes possible increased cooperation between the sectors rather than rivalry - and it is here that the best hope of progress lies, as is already clear from experience in the US.

Finally a brief word about the UK, where for historical reasons the private sector, which educates about 6.5% of the school population in England and Wales and 3.4% in Scotland, yet provides at the end of the secondary stage almost 25% of students in higher education and 45% of students at Oxford and Cambridge. The boys' and girls' so-called public schools and the preparatory schools, which are the largest group in the total of roughly 2500, are charitable foundations, some of great antiquity and to varying degrees socially, academically and financially selective. Government aid is limited to the present government's Assisted (means-tested) Places Scheme for some 5000 children annually who show outstanding ability in admission tests; and to help with boarding costs for diplomatic and military personnel serving abroad. The schools themselves do their best to offer scholarships and bursaries and many parents contrive to pay the very high fees through insurance schemes taken out early in a child's life. As charities the schools are relieved of half the local rates and of taxes such as VAT and can receive donations under covenant which are increased by the return to the charity of income tax paid by the donor; and apart from the requirements of public examinations they have complete freedom in educational matters, religious instruction and observance, choice of staff,etc. The former Direct Grant Scheme under which some 170 established independent schools, 50 of them Roman Catholic, received financial aid from the Ministry of Education in return for educating a proportion of pupils free and others at fees depending on income, was abolished in the 70s by a Labour government, with some loss of upward mobility for the able. The private sector in

Great Britain is therefore open to the charge of 'elitist' exclusiveness both in terms of cost and of academic selection; and the historical effect of an established church created by Henry the 8th. at the Reformation has increased this exclusiveness by making possible the incorporation of most local Anglican and Catholic grammar schools during the 19th and early 20th centuries into the state system as 'voluntary-aided' schools, a process which they have more recently come to regard as restrictive of their liberty in terms of organisation and selection. As a result of this process the private sector in the UK lacks the breadth which is so marked in the US, where over 60% of private pupils attend Catholic Schools and 85% denominational schools of some kind.

In the UK the long-standing influence of 'public school' pupils and especially old boys *(alumni)* of Eton, Winchester, Rugby, Westminster and other famous schools in Parliament, the professions and the City of London, together with their dominance of Oxford and Cambridge, though now much reduced, has aggravated public hostility to private education even in liberal democratic circles, which advocate the withdrawal of charitable status and financial aid such as it is; and it is the declared policy of the British Labour Party ultimately to abolish private education entirely, despite British adherence to the various declarations of human rights which guarantee freedom of parental choice and the right of citizens to establish private schools. There are also those who argue that the decline of the British economy is the fault of a pattern of education which sets too much store on the liberal professions and too little on technology and engineering. This is not the time and place for a detailed analysis of the British problem. I can only say that as the state system crumbles visibly and the hope pinned on the social engineering expected from the comprehensive schools fades into disillusion, the demand for places in independent schools grows daily and new schools are born and flourish. For our present purpose this illustrates clearly enough how government measures or the lack of them and the historical and social development of our country have combined to place us near the top end of the elitist spectrum.

I have recently returned from a longish study tour in Australia and New Zealand and found in Australia a fascinating

development of the English tradition of private education in the context of a growing, democratically aware and practically-minded society in which nowadays 25% of all children attend quite highly subsidized but largely academically unselective private schools, the vast majority of which have some confessional allegiance. I note the breadth of this private sector, and the importance of the Catholic vote, which clearly plays a major role in securing the government finance which reduces costs and widens intakes to the benefit of equality of opportunity and upward mobility. I look forward to Mr. Boyd's comments and to making my own analysis as my study progresses.